

AMAZEMENT

BY STEPHEN FRENCH WHITMAN

THREE is sometimes melancholy in revisiting, after years of absence, a place where one was joyous in the days of youth. That is why sadness stole over me on the evening of my return to Florence.

To be sure, the physical beauties of the Italian city were intact. Modernity had not farther encroached upon the landmarks that had witnessed the birth of a new age, powerful, even violent, in its individualism. From those relics, indeed — from the massive palaces, the noble porches, the monuments rising in the public squares—there still seemed to issue a faint vibration of ancient audacity and force. It was as if stone and bronze had absorbed into their particles, and stored through centuries, the great emotions released in Florence during that time of mental expansion called the Renaissance.

But this integrity of scene and influence only increased my regrets. Though the familiar setting was still here, the familiar human figures seemed all departed. I looked in vain for sobered versions of the faces that had smiled, of old, around tables in comfortable cafés, in an atmosphere of youthful gaiety, where at any moment one might be enmeshed in a Florentine prank that Boccaccio could not have bettered.

One such prank rose, all at once, before my mind's eye, and suddenly, in the midst of my pessimism, I laughed aloud.

I recalled the final scene of that escapade, which I myself had managed to devise. The old café had rung with a bellow of delight; the victim, ridiculous in his consternation, had rushed at me howling for vengeance. But the audience,

hemming him in, had danced 'round him singing a ribald little song. The air was full of battered felt hats, coffee spoons, lumps of sugar, and waving handkerchiefs. Out on the piazza the old cab-horses had pricked up their ears; the shopkeepers had run to their doorways; the police had taken notice. It was not every day that the champion joker among us was caught in such a net as he delighted to spread.

Where were they, all my jolly young men and women? Maturity, matrimony, perhaps still other acts of fate, had scattered them. Here and there a grizzled waiter let fall the old names with a shrug of perplexity, then hastened to answer the call of a rising generation as cheerful as if it were not doomed, also, to dispersion and regrets.

Then, too, in returning I had been so unfortunate as to find Florence on the verge of spring.

The soft evening air was full of a sweetness exhaled by the surrounding cup of hills. From baskets of roses, on the steps of porticoes, a fragrance floated up like incense round the limbs of statues, which were bathed in a golden light by the lamps of the piazza. Those marble countenances were placid with an eternal youth, beneath the same stars that had embellished irrevocable nights, that recalled some excursions into an enchanted world, some romantic gestures that the knack for which was gone.

"After all," I thought, "it is better not to find one of the old circle. We should make each other miserable by our reminiscences."

No sooner had I reflected thus than I found myself face to face with Antonio.

Antonio was scarcely changed. His dark visage was still vital with intelligence, still keen and strange from the exercise of an inexhaustible imagination. Yet in his eyes, which formerly had sparkled with the wit of youth, there was more depth and a hint of somberness. He had become a celebrated satirist.

"What luck!" he cried, embracing me with sincere delight. "But to think that I should have to run into you on the street!"

"I asked for you everywhere."

"In the old places? I never go to them. You have not dined? Nor I. Here, let us take this cab."

He hurried me off to a restaurant of the suburbs. Under the starry sky we sat down at a table beside a sunken garden, in which nightingales were trying their voices among the blossoms, whose perfume had been intensified by dew.

It was an old-time dinner, at least, that Antonio provided; but, alas! those others were not there to eke out the illusion of the past. To each name, as I uttered it, Antonio added an epitaph. This one had gone to bury himself in the Abruzzi hills. That one had become a professor at Bologna. Others, in vanishing, had left no trace behind them.

"And Leonello, who was going to surpass Michael Angelo?"

"Oh," my friend responded, "Leonello is still here, painting his pictures. Like me, he could not live long beyond the air of Florence."

Antonio, in fact, could trace his family back through Florentine history into the Middle Ages.

"Is Leonello the same?" I pursued. "Always up to some nonsense? But you were not much behind him in those insane adventures."

"Take that to yourself," Antonio retorted. "I recall one antic, just before you left us—" He broke off to meditate. Clicking his tongue against his teeth, he gazed at me almost with resentment, as if I were responsible for this depressing

work of time. "No!" he exclaimed, looking at me in gloomy speculation, while, in the depths of his eyes, one seemed to see his extraordinary intelligence perplexed and baffled. "That war of wit is surely over. The old days are gone for good. Let us make the best of it." And he asked me what I had been doing.

I made my confession. In those years I had become fascinated by psychic phenomena—by the intrusion into human experience of weird happenings that materialism could not very well explain. Many of these happenings indicated, at least to my satisfaction, not only future existences, but also previous ones. I admitted to Antonio that, since I was in Italy again, I intended to investigate the case of a Perugian peasant girl who, though she had never been associated with educated persons, was subject to trances in which she babbled the Greek language of Cleopatra's time, and accurately described the appearance of pre-Christian Alexandria.

"I am writing a book on such matters," I concluded. "You, of course, will laugh at it—"

His somber eyes, which had been watching me intently, became blank for a time, then suddenly gave forth a flash.

"I? Laugh because you have been enthralled by weirdness?" he cried, as one who, all at once, has been profoundly moved. Yet laugh he did, in loud tones that were almost wild with strange elation. "Pardon me," he stammered, passing a trembling hand across his forehead. "You do not know the man that I have become of late."

What had my words called to his mind? From that moment everything was changed. The weight of some mysterious circumstance had descended upon Antonio, overwhelming, as it seemed to me, the pleasure that he had found in this reunion. Through the rest of the dinner he was silent, a prey to that dark exultancy, to that uncanny agitation.

This silence persisted while the cab bore us back into the city.

In the narrow streets a blaze of light

from the open fronts of cook-shops flooded the lower stories of some palaces which once on a time had housed much fierceness and beauty, treachery and perverse seductiveness. Knowing Antonio's intimate acquaintance with those splendid days, I strove to rouse him by congenial allusions. His preoccupation continued; the historic syllables that issued from my lips were wasted in the clamor of the street. Yet when I pronounced the name of one of those bygone belles, Fiammetta Adimari, he repeated slowly, like a man who has found the key to everything:

“Fiammetta!”

“What is it, Antonio? Are you in love?”

He gave me a piercing look and sprang from the cab. We had reached the door of his house.

Antonio's bachelor apartment was distinguished by a handsome austerity. The red-tiled floors reflected faintly the lights of antique candelabra, which shed their luster also upon chests quaintly carved, bric-à-brac that museums would have coveted, and chairs adorned with threadbare coats of arms. Beside the mantelpiece hung a small oil-painting, as I thought, of Antonio himself, his black hair reaching to his shoulders, and on his head a hat of the Renaissance.

“No,” said he, giving me another of his strange looks, “it is my ancestor, Antonio di Manzecca, who died in the year fifteen hundred.”

I remembered that somewhere in the hills north of the city there was a dilapidated stronghold called the Castle of Manzecca. Behind those walls, in the confusion of the Middle Ages, Antonio's family had developed into a nest of rural tyrants. Those old steel-clad men of the Manzecca had become what were called “Signorotti”—lords of a height or two, swooping down to raid passing convoys, waging petty wars against the neighbouring castles, and at times, like bantams, too arrogant to bear in mind the shortness of their spurs, defying even Florence. In the end, as I recalled the mat-

ter, Florence had chastened the Manzecca, together with all the other lordlings of that region. The survivors had come to live in the city, where, through these hundreds of years, many changes of fortune had befallen them. My friend Antonio was their last descendant.

“But,” I protested, examining the portrait, “your resemblance to this Antonio of the Renaissance could not possibly be closer.”

Instead of replying, he sat down, rested his elbows on his knees, and pressed his fists against his temples. Presently I became aware that he was laughing, very softly, but in such an unnatural manner that I shivered.

I grew alarmed. It was true that in our years of separation Antonio's physical appearance had not greatly changed; but what was the meaning of this mental difference? Was his mind in danger of some sinister overshadowing? Were these queer manners the symptoms of an incipient mania? It is proposed that genius is a form of madness. Was the genius of Antonio, in its phenomenal development, on the point of losing touch with sanity? As my thoughts leaped from one conjecture to another, the tiled room took on the chill that pervades a mausoleum. From the bowl on the table the petals of a dying rose fell in a sudden cascade, like a dismal portent.

“The Castle of Manzecca,” I ventured, merely to break the silence, “is quite ruined, I suppose?”

“No, the best part of it still stands. I have had some rooms restored.”

“You own it?”

“I bought it back a year ago. It is there that I—” He buried his face in his hands.

“Antonio,” I said, “you are in some great trouble.”

“It is not trouble,” he answered, in smothered tones. “But why should I hesitate to make my old friend, whose mind does not reject weirdness, my confidant? I warn you, however, that it will be a confidence weird enough to make even your experience in such matters

seem tame. Go first to Perugia. Examine the peasant girl who chatters of ancient Alexandria. Return to my house one week from to-night, at dusk, and you shall share my secret."

He rose, averted his face, and went to throw himself upon a couch, or porch-bed, another relic, its woodwork covered with faded paint and gilt, amid which one might trace the gallants of the sixteenth century in pursuit of nymphs—an allegory of that age's longing for the classic past. I left him thus, flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling, oblivious of my farewell.

Poor Antonio! What a return to Florence!

A week from that night, at dusk, I returned. At Perugia I had filled a pocket-book with notes on the peasant girl's trances. The spell of those strange revelations was yet on me, but at Antonio's door I felt that I stood on the threshold of a still more agitating disclosure.

My knock was answered by Antonio himself, his hat on his head and a motor-coat over his arm. He seemed burning with impatience.

"You have your overcoat? Good." And he locked the door on the outside.

We stepped into a limousine, which whirled us away through the twilight. The weather made one remember that even in Florence the merging of March into April could be violent. To-night masses of harsh-looking clouds sped across the sky before an icy wind from the mountains. A burial-party, assembled at a convent gate, had their black robes fluttering, their waxen torches blown out.

"Death!" muttered Antonio, with a sardonic grimace. "And they call it unconquerable!"

As we paused before a dwelling-house, two men emerged upon the pavement. They were Leonello, the artist, and another friend of the old days, named Leonardo. The unusual occasion constrained our greetings. The newcomers,

after pressing my hand, devoted themselves with grave solicitude to Antonio.

He burst forth at them like a man whose nervous tension is nearly unendurable:

"Yes, hang it all! I am quite well. Why the devil will you persist in coddling me?"

Leonello and Leonardo gave me a mournful look.

We now stopped at another door, where there joined us two ladies unknown to me. Both were comely, with delicate features full of sensibility. Neither, I judged, had reached the age of thirty. In the moment of meeting—a moment notable for a stammering of incoherent phrases, a darting of sidelong looks at Antonio, a general effect of furtiveness and excitement—no one remembered to present me to these ladies. However, while we were arranging ourselves in the limousine I gathered that the name of one of them was Laura, and that the other's name was Lina. In their faces, on which the street-lights cast intermittent flashes, I seemed to discern a struggle between apprehension and avidity for this adventure.

The silence, and the tension of all forms, continued even when we left the city behind us and found ourselves speeding northward along a country road.

"Northward. To the Castle of Manzecca, then?" I asked myself.

The rays from our lamps revealed the trees all bending toward the south. The wind pressed against our car, as if to hold us back from the revelation awaiting us ahead, in the midst of the black night, whence this interminable whistling moan pervaded nature. Rain dashed against the glass. Through the blurred windows the lights of farms appeared, to be instantly engulfed by darkness. Then everything vanished except the illuminated streak of road. We seemed to be fleeing from the known world, across a span of radiance that trembled over an immeasurable void, into the supernatural.

The limousine glided to a standstill.
"Here we abandon the car."

We entered the kitchen of a humble farm-house. Strings of garlic hung from the ceiling, and on the floor lay some valises.

As the ladies departed into another room, Antonio mastered his emotion and addressed me.

"What we must do, and what I must ask you to promise, may at first seem to you ridiculous," he said. "Yet your acceptance of my conditions is a matter of life or death, not to any one here present, but to another, whom we are about to visit. What I require is this: you are to put on, as we shall, the costumes in these valises, which are after the fashion of the early sixteenth century. Indeed, when our journey is resumed, there must be about us nothing to suggest the present age. Moreover, I must have your most earnest promise that when we reach our destination you will refrain from giving the least hint, by word or action, that the sixteenth century has passed away. If you feel unable to carry out this deception, we must leave you here. The slightest blunder would be fatal."

No sooner had Antonio uttered these words than he turned in a panic to Leonello and Leonardo.

"Am I wrong to have brought him?" he demanded, distractedly. "Can I depend on him at every point? You two, and Laura and Lina, know what it would mean if he should make a slip."

Much disturbed, I declared that I wished for nothing better than to return to Florence at once. But Leonardo restrained me, while Leonello, patting Antonio's shoulder in reassurance, responded:

"Trust him. You do his quick wit an injustice."

Finally Antonio, with a heavy sigh, unlocked the valises.

Hitherto I had associated masquerade with festive expectations, but nothing could have been less festive than the atmosphere in which we donned those

costumes. They were rich, accurate, and complete. The wigs of flowing hair were perfectly deceptive. The fur-trimmed surcoats and the long hose were in fabrics suggestive of lost weaving arts. Each dagger, buckle, hat-gem, and finger-ring, was a true antique. Even when the two ladies appeared, in sumptuous Renaissance dresses, their coiffures as closely in accordance with that period as their expanded silhouettes, no smile crossed any face.

"Are we all—" began Antonio. His voice failed him.

Muffled in thick cloaks, we faced the blustery night again.

Behind the farm-house stood horses, saddled and bridled in an obsolete manner. Our small cavalcade wound up a hillside path, which, in the darkness, the beasts felt out for themselves. One became aware of cypress-trees on either hillside, immensely tall, to judge by the thickness of their trunks. More and more numerous became these trees, as was evident from the lamentation of their countless branches. In its groan, the forest voiced to the utmost that melancholy which the imaginative mind associates with cypresses in Italy, where they seem always to raise their funereal grace around the sites of vanished splendors.

We were ascending one of the hills that lie scattered above Florence toward the mountains, and that were formerly all covered with these solemn trees.

But the wind grew even stronger as we neared the summit. Above us loomed a gray bulk. The Castle of Manzecca reluctantly unveiled itself, bleak, towering, impressive in its decay—a ruin that was still a fortress, and that time had not injured so much as had its mortal besiegers, the last of whom had died centuries ago. A gate swung open. Our horses clattered into a courtyard which abruptly blazed with torches.

In that dazzle all the omens of our journey were fulfilled. We found ourselves, as it appeared, not only in a place

embodying another age, but in that other age itself.

The streaming torches revealed shock-headed servitors of the Renaissance, their black tunics stamped in vermillion, front and back, with the device of the Manzecca. By the steps glittered the spear-points of a clump of men-at-arms whose swarthy and rugged faces remained impassive under flattened helmets. But as we dismounted a greyhound came leaping from the castle, and in the doorway hovered an old maid-servant. To her Antonio ran straightway, his cape whipping out behind him.

“Speak, Nuta! Is she well?” he demanded.

We followed him into the castle.

It was a spacious hall, paved with stone, its limits shadowy, its core illuminated brilliantly with candles. From the rafters dangled some banners, tattered and queerly designed. Below these, in the midst of the hall—in a mellow fulgence that she herself seemed to give forth—there awaited us a woman glorified by youth and happiness, who pressed her hand to her heart.

She wore a gown of violet-colored silk, the sleeves puffed at the shoulders, the bodice tight across the breast and swelling at the waist, the skirt voluminous. On either side of her bosom, sheer linen, pucker'd by golden rosettes, mounted to form behind her neck a little ruff. Over her golden hair, every strand of which had been drawn back strictly from her brow, a white veil was clasped, behind her ears, by a band of pearls and amethysts cut in cabuchon.

Still, she was remarkable less for her costume than for the singularity of her charms.

To what was this singularity due? To the intense emotions that she seemed to be harboring? Or to the arrangement of her lovely features, to-day unique, which made one think of backgrounds composed of brocade and armor, the freshly painted canvases of Titian and the dazzling newness of statues by Michael Angelo? As she approached, that singu-

larity of hers became still more disquieting, as though the fragrance that enveloped her were not a woman's chosen perfume, but the very aroma of the magnificent past.

Antonio regarded her with his soul in his eyes, then greedily kissed her hands. When the others had saluted her, each of them as much moved as though she were an image in a shrine, Antonio said in a hoarse voice to me:

“I present you to Madonna Fiammetta di Foscone, my affianced bride. Madonna, this gentleman comes from a distant country to pay you homage.”

“He is welcome,” she answered, in a voice that accorded with her peculiar beauty.

And my bewilderment deepened as I realized that they were speaking not modern Italian, but what I gathered to be the Italian of the sixteenth century.

I found myself with Antonio in a tower-room, whither he had brought me on the ladies' retirement to prepare themselves for supper.

The wind, howling round the tower, pressed against the narrow windows covered with oiled linen. The cypress forest, which on all sides descended from our peak into the valleys, gave forth a continuous moan. Every instant the candle-light threatened to go out. The very tower seemed to be trembling, like Antonio, in awe of the secret about to be revealed. For a while my poor friend could say nothing. Seated in his rich disguise on a bench worn smooth by men whose tombs were crumbling, he leaned forward beneath the burden of his thoughts, and the long locks of his wig hung down as if to veil the disorder of his features.

Finally he began:

“In the year fifteen hundred my family still called this place their home. There were only two of them left, two brothers, the older bearing the title Lord of Manzecca. The younger brother was that Antonio di Manzecca whose portrait you saw on the wall of my apart-

ment in the city. It is to him, as you observed, that I bear so close a resemblance.

"In a hill-castle not far away lived another family, the Foscone.

"The Lord of Foscone, a widower, had only one child left, a daughter seventeen years old. Her name was Fiammetta. Even in Florence it was said that to the north, amid the wilderness of cypress-trees, there dwelt a maiden whose beauty surrounded her with golden rays like a nimbus."

I remembered our entrance into this castle, my first glimpse of the woman awaiting us in the middle of the hall, and the glow of light around her that appeared to be a radiance expanding from her person.

But my friend continued:

"Between the two castles there was friendly intercourse. It was presumed that the Lord of Foscone would presently give his daughter in marriage to the Lord of Manzecca. Fate, however, determined that Fiammetta and Antonio di Manzecca, the younger brother, should fall in love with each other.

"Need I describe to you the fervor of that passion in the Italian springtime, at a period of our history when all the emotions were terrific in their force?

"At night, Antonio di Manzecca would slip away to the Castle of Foscone. She would be waiting for him on the platform outside her chamber, above the ramparts, overlooking the path across the hills. It chanced that by the aid of vines and fissures in the masonry he could climb the castle wall almost to that platform—almost near enough, indeed, to touch her finger-tips. Unhappily, there was nothing there to which she could attach a twisted sheet. So thus they made love—she bending down toward him, he clutching with toes and hands at the wall, her whispers making him dizzier than his perilous posture, her tears falling upon his lips through a space so little, yet greater than the distance between two stars.

"But almost everything is discovered.

Antonio's meetings with Fiammetta became known to his elder brother.

"One evening Fiammetta, from the high platform, saw Antonio approaching while it was still twilight. All at once he was surrounded by servants of his own house, who had been waiting for him in ambush. Before he could move, half a dozen daggers sank into his body. Amid the thorns and nettles he sprawled lifeless, under the eyes of his beloved. As the assassins dragged his body away, there burst from the platform a prolonged peal of laughter.

"Fiammetta di Foscone had gone mad."

At that tragedy, at least, I was not surprised. The Italy of the Renaissance was full of such episodes—the murderous jealousy of brothers, the obedient cruelty of retainers, the wreckage of women's sanity by the fall of horrors much more ingeniously contrived than this. What froze my blood was the anticipation gradually shaping in my mind. I felt that this was the prelude to something monstrous, incredible, which I should be forced to believe.

"She had gone mad," my friend repeated, staring before him. "She had, in other words, lost contact with what we call reality. To her that state of madness had become reality, its delusions truth, and everything beyond those delusions misty, unreal, or non-existent."

His voice died away as he looked at his hands with an expression of disbelief. He even reached forward to touch my knee, then sighed:

"You will soon understand why I am sometimes possessed with the idea that I am dreaming."

And he resumed his tale:

"Antonio di Manzecca was buried. His elder brother found a wife elsewhere. The Lord of Foscone married again, and by that marriage had other children. But still his daughter Fiammetta stood nightly on the platform of the Castle of Foscone, gazing down at the hill path,

waiting for her Antonio to climb the wall and whisper his love.

"Now she only lived in that state of ardent expectancy. The days and weeks and months were but one hour, the hour preceding his last approach to her. Every moment, in her delusion, she expected him to end that hour by coming to her as young as ever, to find her as winsome as before. In consequence, time vanished from her thought. And in vanishing from her thought, time lost its power over her.

"Her father died; but Fiammetta still kept her vigil, in appearance the same as on the evening of that tragedy. A new generation of the Foscone grew old in their turn, but Fiammetta's loveliness was still perfect. In her madness there seemed to be a sanity surpassing the sanity of other mortals. For by becoming insensible to time she had attained an earthly immortality, an uncorrupted physical beauty, in which she constantly looked forward to the delight of loving.

"So she went on and on—"

The tower shook in terror of the gale, and we shook with it, in terror of this revelation. My thoughts turned toward the woman below, who had smiled at us from that aura of physical resplendency. I felt my hair rising, and heard a voice, my own, cry out:

"No, no!"

"Yes!" Antonio shouted, fixing his hands upon my arms. We were both standing, and our leaping shadows on the wall resembled a combat in which one was struggling to force insanity upon the other. He went on speaking, but his words were drowned in a screaming of vast forces that clutched at the tower as if in fury because the normal processes of nature had been defied. Would those forces attain their revenge? Was the tower about to thunder down upon the Castle of Manzecca, annihilating her and us, the secret and its possessors? For a moment I would have welcomed even that escape from thinking.

"Yes," he repeated, releasing my arms and sitting down limply on the

bench. "As you anticipate, so it turned out."

I was still able to protest:

"Admitted that this has happened elsewhere, to a certain degree. In Victorian England there lived a woman whose love-affair was wrecked and whose mind automatically closed itself against everything associated with her tragedy, or subsequent to it. In her madness she, too, protected herself against pain by living in expectation of the lover's return. Because that expectation was restricted to her girlhood, she remained a girl in appearance for over fifty years. Fifty years, that is comprehensible!"

"The principle is the same," said Antonio, wearily. "Every mental phenomenon has minor and major examples. But I will tell you the rest.

"The Foscone, also, finally moved to Florence. Their castle was left in the care of hereditary servants, devoted and discreet. On that isolated hilltop no chance was afforded strangers to solve the mystery of the woman who paced the high platform in the attire of another age. Was there, in the Foscone's concealment of the awesome fact, a medieval impulse, the ancient instinct of noble houses to defend themselves against all forms of aggression, including curiosity? Or was it merely the usual aversion to being identified with abnormality? Some abnormality is so terrifying that it seals the loosest lips.

"Now and then, to be sure, some servant's tongue was set wagging by wine, or some heir of the Foscone confided in his sweetheart. But the rumor, if it went farther, soon became distorted and incredible, amid the ghost-stories of a hundred Italian castles, palaces, and villas. I myself found hints in the archives of my family, yet saw in them only a pretty tale, such as results when romantic invention is combined with pride of race.

"But I was destined to sing another tune.

"Not long ago, the last of the Fos-

cone's modern generation passed away. There came to me an old woman-servant from the castle. It was Nuta, whom you saw below as we entered.

"Why had she sought me out? Because, if you please, in the year fifteen hundred one of my family had brought this thing to pass. It seemed to Nuta, the fact now being subject to discovery by the executors of the estate, that the care of her charge devolved upon me.

"At first I believed that old Nuta was the mad one. In the end, however, I accompanied her to the castle. At dusk, concealed by the cypresses, I discerned on the platform a face that seemed to have been transported from another epoch just in order to pierce my heart with an intolerable longing. I fell in love as one slips into a vortex, and instantly the rational world was lost beyond a whorl of ecstasy and fright.

"I regained Florence with but one thought: how could she be restored to sanity, yet be maintained in that beauty which had triumphed over centuries? As I entered my apartment I saw before me the portrait of that other Antonio di Manzecca, whom I so closely resembled, whom she had loved, whose return she still awaited. I stood there blinded by a flash of inspiration.

"At midnight my plan was complete."

As he paused, and the conclusion became clear to me, I was taken with a kind of stupor.

"A few days later," he said, "as she stood gazing down through the twilight, a man emerged from the forest, in face and dress the image of that other Antonio di Manzecca. At his signal, servants in the old-time livery of the Manzecca appeared with a ladder, which they leaned against the ramparts. He set foot upon the platform. Her pallor turned deathlike; her eyes became blank; she fainted in his arms. When she recovered she was in the Castle of Manzecca.

"That shock had restored her reason.

"Now everything around her very

artfully suggested the sixteenth century—the furniture, the most trivial utensils, the costume of the humblest person in the castle. Nuta attended her. The convalescent was told that she had been ill in consequence of the attack on her lover, but that he, instead of succumbing, had been spirited away and stealthily nursed back to health. Again whole, he had returned to avenge himself on his brother, whom he had killed. Meanwhile her father had died. Therefore she had been brought from the Castle of Foscone to the Castle of Manzecca to enjoy the protection of her Antonio, whom she was now free to marry.

"All this was what she wanted to believe, so she believed it."

But Antonio's face was filled with a new distress. He rose, to pace the floor with the gestures of a man who realizes that he is locked in a cell to which there is no key.

"In the restoration of her mind," he groaned, "my own peace of mind has been destroyed. Even this love, the strangest and most thrilling in the world, will never allay the heartquakes that I have brought upon myself.

"With her perception of time restored, she will now be subject to time like other mortals. As year follows year, her youthfulness will merge into maturity, her maturity into old age, here in this castle, where nothing must ever suggest that she has attained a century other than her own. For me that means a ceaseless vigilance and fear. My devotion will always be mingled with forebodings of some blunder, some unforeseen intrusion of the present, some lightning-like revelation of the truth to her."

At that he broke down.

"Ah, if that happened, what horror should I witness?"

The gale sounded like the hooting of a thousand demons who were preparing for this man a frightful retribution. Yet even in that moment I envied him.

To her beauty, which had bewitched me at my first sight of her, was added another allurement—the thought of a

magical flight far beyond the boundaries imprisoning other men. If romance is a striving toward something at once unique and sympathetic, here was romance attained. Moreover, in embracing that exquisite personification of the Renaissance, one might add to love the glamour of a terrible audacity. And the addition of glamour to love has always been one of the most assiduously practised arts.

At the bottom of the winding tower staircase, in the doorway of the hall where she had greeted us, we paused to compose ourselves.

"At least," Antonio besought me, "when in doubt, remain silent."

We entered the hall. Under a wooden gallery adorned with carved and tinted shields the supper-table was laid.

They awaited us, shimmering in their fantastic finery—the ladies Laura and Lina, my old friends Leonardo and Leonello, and the ineffable Fiammetta di Foscone. The visitors' cheeks seemed hectic from the excitement of the hour; but her face was flushed, her eyes shone, for her own reasons. As I approached her my heartbeats suffocated me. Yes, I would have taken Antonio's place and shouldered all his terrors! Before me the fair conqueror of time disappeared in a haze, out of which her voice emerged like a sweet utterance from beyond the tomb.

"You are pleased with the castle, messere?"

As I was striving to respond, Antonio said to her, half aside, in that quaint species of Italian which he had used before:

"He speaks our language with difficulty, Madonna, and in a dialect. This disability will embarrass him till he finds himself more at home."

"Then let us sup," she exclaimed. "For since this new custom of a third meal has become fashionable in Florence, no doubt you are all expiring of hunger. So quickly does habit become tyrannous, especially when it involves a pleasure."

In some manner or other I seated myself at the table.

The servants bore in, on silver platters, small chickens garnished with sugar and rose-water, a sort of galantine, tarts of almonds and honey, caramels of pine-seed. From the gallery overhead came the tinkle of a rota, a kind of guitar. The musician produced a whimsical tune suggesting a picnic of lords and ladies in the garden of an antique villa, where trick fountains, masked by blossoms, drenched the unwary with streams of water. But in the chimney of the great, cold fireplace behind my back the wind still growled its threats; the voice of Nature still menaced these audacious mortals, who were celebrating the humiliation of her laws.

Beyond the candle-light the beauty of Fiammetta di Foscone became blinding. In her there was no sign of an unnatural preservation, as, for example, in a flower that has been sustained, yet subtly altered, by imprisonment in ice. Nor did her countenance show in the least that glaze of time which changes, without abating, the fairness of marble goddesses surviving for us from remote ages of esthetic victory. But wait; she was not an animated statue, nor any product of nature other than flesh and blood! And the flesh, the glance, the whole person of this creature from another era, expressed a glorious young womanhood. I was lost in admiration, pity, and dread. For over this shining miracle hovered the shadow of disaster. One could not forget the countless menaces surrounding her.

If she should grasp the truth, if all of a sudden she should realize her disaccordance with the world of mortals, what would happen to her before our eyes? Would she succumb instantly? Or would she first shrivel into some appalling monstrosity? This deception could not last forever. Might it not end to-night?

Did the others have similar premonitions?

Their smiles seemed tremulous and wan, their movements constrained and

timorous. All their efforts at gaiety were impeded by the inertia of fear. At every speech the lips of Lina and Laura quivered, the hands of Leonello and Leonardo were clenched in a nervous spasm. Antonio controlled himself only by the most heroic efforts.

What a price to pay for an illusion of happiness that was destined to a ghastly end! Yet I would still have paid that heavy price exacted from Antonio.

Fiammetta di Foscone became infected by our nervousness. At one moment her mirth was feverish; at an other, a look of vague uneasiness crossed her face. Was our secret gradually penetrating to her subconscious mind? Was she to learn the fact, and perish of it, not because of bungling word or action on our part, but merely from the unwitting transmission of our thoughts?

The others redoubled their travesty of merriment. They voiced the gossip of a vanished society; the politics, fashions, and scandals, of old Florence. One heard the names of noble families long since extinct, accounts of historic escapades related as if they had happened yesterday. Fiammetta recovered her animation.

Her dewy eyes turned to Antonio. Her fingers caressed her betrothal-ring, which was like the wedding-ring of the twentieth century. And in this hall tricked out with lies, amid these guests and servants who were the embodiment of falsehood, an oppressing atmosphere of dread was clarified, for a moment, by the strength and delicacy of her love.

They discussed the virtues of the Muses, the plagiarisms of Petrarch, the wonders of astrology. Her uneasiness revived. In a voice more musical than the rota in the gallery, she asked:

'My dear friends, would you attribute to some planetary influence a feeling of strangeness that I receive at times, even from the air? I demand of you whether the air does not have an unfamiliar smell to-night?"

There was a freezing moment of silence.

"It is this great wind," muttered Leonardo, "that has brought us new air from afar."

"Every place has its smell," was Leonello's contribution. "It is natural that the Castle of Manzecca should smell differently from the Castle of Foscone."

Antonio thanked his friends with an eloquent look.

"True," she assented, pensively, "every spot, every person, is surrounded by its especial ether, produced by its peculiar activity. This house, not only in its smell, but in its tenor of life, and even in its food, differs vastly from my own house, which, nevertheless, is just across the hills."

Antonio drained his goblet at a gulp. He got out the words:

"We are provincial, we Manzecca. Like a race apart."

"All old families, jealous of their integrity, are the same," ventured Laura, who looked, nevertheless, as if she were about to faint.

"Or maybe," mused Fiammetta, "it is because I have been ill that things perplex me, and sometimes startle me by an effect of strangeness. There are moments when even the stars look odd to me, and when the countryside, viewed from the tower above us, is bewildering. In one direction I see woods where I should have expected meadows; in another direction, fields where I should have expected woods. But then, I now view the countryside from a tower other than my own, and see in a new aspect that landscape with which I thought myself so well acquainted. Does that explain it?"

How touching, how pitiable, was her expression, half arch, half pleading, and so beautiful! "Oh, lovely and terrible prodigy!" I thought, "draw back; banish those thoughts; or, rather, no longer think at all—for you are on the edge of the abyss!"

Antonio spoke with difficulty:

"Dearest one, do not pain me by mentioning that illness of yours. Do not pain yourself by dwelling on it in your

mind. The past with all its misfortunes is gone forever. Let us live in the present and contemplate a future full of bliss."

A quivering sigh of assent and relief went round the supper-table. But Fiammetta protested:

"I should not care to forget the past. It contained too much happiness. The hours at twilight, when I waited on the platform of the Castle of Foscone, and you clambered up the wall, are not for oblivion! Do you remember, Antonio, how you once brought with you a bunch of little damask roses, which you tossed up to me while clinging to the masonry? Those roses became my treasure. The sweetest one of them I locked in a tiny silver box which I kept always by me. That box came with me from the Castle of Foscone. The key is lost; but you shall open it with your dagger, and learn how I have cherished an emblem of that past which you ask me to forget."

With a rare smile, she drew from the bosom of her gown a very small coffer of silver, its chiseling worn smooth by innumerable caresses. Poor soul! it was in her bosom that she had cherished this pretty little box, more cruelly fatal than a viper.

Antonio, his jaws sagging, rose half-way out of his chair, then sank back, speechless and livid. Unaware, eager, and imperious, Fiammetta demanded:

"A dagger!"

Too late Antonio managed to put out a shaking hand in protest. Already a fool of a servant had presented his dirk to her. In a twinkling—before we could stop her—Fiammetta had pried back the lid.

The silver box, its oxidized interior as black as ink, contained, in place of the damask rose that had bloomed in the year fifteen hundred, only a few grains of dust.

There was no sound except from the wind, which yelled its devilish glee round the castle and in the chimney of the fireplace.

She had risen to her feet. In her eyes,

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peering at the little coffer, bewilderment gave place to dismay. But in our faces she found a consternation far surpassing hers.

"Only dust?"

Antonio distorted his mouth in a vain effort to speak. At last, with a frantic oath, he swept the silver box into the fireplace, where it fell amid the brushwood and inflammable rubbish piled ready for lighting under the big logs.

Fiammetta had tried to stop him. Under her clutching hand, his fur-trimmed sleeve had slipped up, exposing his forearm. She was staring at his forearm.

"The scar?" she whispered. "Was it not here, when you raised your arm to shield yourself against them, that you caught the first knife-thrust? How long does it take for such a scar to pass entirely away?"

Lina and Laura sank back in their chairs. Leonello averted his face. Leonardo turned away. Again Antonio tried to speak. The terror that held us in its grip was communicated to Fiammetta di Foscone.

Her countenance became bloodless. Her teeth chattered. She murmured:

"What is happening to me? I am so cold!"

She sank down, amid billows of violet-colored silk, between Antonio's arms, before the fireplace. Her veil, confined by the band of pearls and amethysts, did not seem as white as her skin.

There was a hysterical babble of voices:

"She is dead! No, she has swooned! Bring vinegar! Rub her hands! Light the fire!"

Then ensued a jostling of guests and servants, who crowded forward to poke a dozen lighted candles at the brushwood. In the midst of this confusion Fiammetta sat before the hearth, her eyes half closed, her head rolling against Antonio's shoulder, her throat, framed by the little ruff, palpitating like the breast of an expiring dove. She was in the throes of the emotions that had been

at last transferred from our minds to hers and that she was doubtless on the point of comprehending.

The brushwood caught fire. At that flicker her eyelids opened. She leaned forward. Under the brushwood, already writhing in flames, was the fragment of a modern Italian newspaper. One plainly saw the title, part of a head-line, and the date.

Fiammetta di Foscone read the date.

As Antonio and I, between us, lifted her into a chair, she kept repeating to herself, in a soft, incredulous voice, the date. And so badly had our wits been paralyzed by this catastrophe, that none of us could find one lying word to utter.

Antonio knelt before her, his arms clasping her knees, his head bowed. He was weeping as if she were already dead. Her hands slowly stole forth to close around his face and lift it up.

"Whatever it is," she breathed, "I still have you."

As she gazed, half lifeless, but still fairer than an untinted statue, at his face, all at once her eyes became enormous. Pushing him from her, she stood bolt-upright at one movement, with a heart-rending scream:

"A stranger!"

That scream was still resounding from the rafters when we saw her fleeing across the hall, her head thrown back, her arms outspread, her white veil and violet draperies floating behind her. Her jewels glittered like the last sparkle of a splendid dream that has been doomed to swift extinction. She vanished through the doorway leading to the tower staircase.

"After her!" some one shouted.

Antonio was first; but at the doorway he stumbled, and Leonello, who was second, fell over him. Vaulting their bodies, I gained the circular staircase that ascended to the tower. I heard Antonio bawling after me:

"She will throw herself from the roof!"

The staircase was black, and the wind whistled down its well. At each landing the heavy doors on either side banged

open and shut. From overhead there descended a long wail, maybe her voice, or maybe one of the countless voices of the storm. As I neared the top, a door through which I had just passed blew shut with a deafening report. I emerged upon the roof of the tower in a torrent of rain. The roof was empty.

I peered over the low battlements. Close below me swayed the tops of cypress-trees; beneath them everything was lost in the obscurity of the night. Soon, however, the darkness was lighted by torches which began to dart to and fro among the trees. By those fitful gleams I made out the crouching backs of men, the livery of the Manzecca with its black and vermillion device, helmets and sword-hilts, and finally upturned faces that appeared ruddy in the torch-light, though I knew that in reality they must be pallid. They called up to me, but the wind whipped their voices away. I made signs that she was not on the tower. The faces disappeared; again the torches wandered among the trees. Now and then I heard a shout, the barking of the greyhound, and a woman—perhaps old Nuta—in hysterics.

I began to descend the staircase. The last door through which I had passed was so tightly wedged, from its slamming, that I could not open it. I sat down on the steps to wait till the others should miss me.

What thoughts!

"Can it be true? Yes, it has happened, and I have seen the end of it! This will kill Antonio. But then, none of us will ever be the same again."

I was sure that my hair had turned white.

And she? A vast wave of pity and longing swept over me and whirled me away into the depths of despair.

Now, I told myself, they have found her. And I fell to shuddering again. Now they have brought her in, unless what they saw, when they found her, scattered them, raving, through the woods. Now they are trying to soothe Antonio, perhaps to wrench a weapon

from his hand. Now surely they have noticed my absence.

I cannot imagine what impulse made me rise, at last, and try the door again. At my first touch it swung open.

Descending the staircase, I re-entered the hall.

They were all seated at the supper-table, which was now decorated with flowers, with baskets of fruit, with plates of bonbons, and with favors in the form of dolls tricked out like little ladies of the Renaissance. The servants wore tail-coats and white-cotton gloves. Leonello and Leonardo, Lina and Laura, even Antonio, had on the evening-dress appropriate to the twentieth century. But my brain reeled indeed when I saw Fiammetta, her hair done in the last Parisian style, her low-neck gown the essence of modern chic.

The company looked at me with tolerant smiles.

"Well," exclaimed Antonio, "you have certainly taken your time! We waited ages for you, then decided that the food was spoiling, and fell to. There is your place, old fellow. I'll have the relishes brought back."

I dropped into my chair with a thud. Leonardo, reaching in front of Lina, took the fabric of my antique costume between thumb and finger.

"Very *recherché*," was his comment. "Do you wear it for a whim?"

"He is soaking wet," announced Lina, compassionately. "I think he has been looking at the garden."

"A botanist!" cried Laura, clapping her hands. "Will you give me some advice, signore? What is the best preservative for damask roses?"

"Water them with credulity," Leonello suggested.

And they all burst out laughing in my face, with the exception of the beautiful Fiammetta.

Antonio, rising and bowing to me, spoke as follows:

"My friend, the sixteenth century bequeathed to us Florentines a little of

its cheerful cruelty and something of its pleasure in vendettas. Casting your thoughts into a less remote past, you may retrieve an impression of your last performance before your departure from the Florence of our youth. Need I describe that performance? Its details were conceived and executed with much talent. It made me, who was its butt, the laughing-stock of our circle for a month. Did we children of Boccaccio impart to you that knack for practical joking? Remember that the pupil does not always permanently abash his teacher. But come, let us make a lasting peace now. If after all these years I managed to catch you off your guard, you will never again catch me so. Let us forget our two chagrins in drinking to this pleasant night, which, though I fancy the fact has escaped you, happens to be the First of April."

While I was still trying to master my feelings, he added:

"I have forgotten to explain that Lina is the wife of Leonello, our new Michael Angelo, who did that portrait of me in the wig and costume of the Renaissance. Laura, on the other hand, is the wife of Leonardo. As for our heroine, Fiammetta, she is the bride of your unworthy Antonio. She has been so gracious as to marry me between two of her theatrical seasons; in fact, we are here on our honeymoon. Why the deuce have you never married? A wife might keep you out of many a laughable predicament."

Leonello hazarded, "He is waiting to marry some lady who can describe, in her trances, the cuisine of Nebuchadnezzar's palace, or the home-life of the Queen of Sheba."

"Do no such thing," Antonio implored me. "And hereafter avoid the supernatural like the plague. May this affair instil into your philosophy of life a little healthy skepticism. There is no better tonic than laughter for one who has caught the malaria of psychical research. But even Nuta, my wife's old dresser at the theater, will tell you that

laughter is precious. You have given her to-night the first out-and-out guffaw that she has enjoyed in years. She says it cured her of a crick in the neck."

The fair Fiammetta, however, made a gesture of reproof, then held out her warm hand to me.

"No, Antonio," she protested, "you have not been clever, after all, but wicked. The worst of revenge is this: that it invariably exceeds its object. To what do you owe this triumph? To his solicitude for you, to his trust in you, which you have abused. Also, as I suspect, to his pity for Fiammetta di Foscone, which I have ill repaid. In fine, we owe the success of this trick to

the misuse of fine emotions. That was not the custom of Messer Giovanni Boccaccio." And to me, "Will you forgive us?"

All the others looked rather chop-fallen. But Antonio soon recovered. He retorted:

"If you could have seen what an ass he made of me that time, you would not at this moment be holding his hand. Look here, old fellow, she has a sister who rather resembles her, and whose hand I have no objection to your holding as long as you wish. We will introduce you to-morrow. Ah yes, we will make you forgive us, you rascal, before we are done with you!"